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Chairman: Mr. Busacca ..... (Italy)

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Agenda item 107: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, questions relating to refugees, returnees and displaced persons and humanitarian questions

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Agenda item 107: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, questions relating to refugees, returnees and displaced persons and humanitarian questions (A/52/12 and Add.1, A/52/97, A/52/116-S/1997/37, A/52/273, A/52/274 and Corr.1, and A/52/360)

1. **Mrs. Ogata** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), introducing her report (A/52/12 and Add.1), said that the number of people for whom the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was responsible had fallen from a peak of 26 million in 1996 to about 23 million. The settlement of some long-standing civil wars in such places as Guatemala, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, Togo and Viet Nam had permitted millions of refugees and other uprooted persons to return home, and other long-intractable situations, such as those in Liberia and Western Sahara, had taken a more positive turn.

2. However, the Great Lakes region of Central Africa continued to present UNHCR with challenges that were unprecedented in the history of that Office, and which left little space for any meaningful exercise of its international protection role. The attack on the refugee camps in the eastern part of the former Zaire, and their destruction in late 1996, had led to the precipitous return to Rwanda of 600,000 refugees, while the request by UNHCR for an international military force to assist in the rescue of several hundred thousand others who had fled westward into the forests of the former Zaire had gone unheeded. UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations had had to rescue refugees on their own, and then to decide whether to repatriate them to areas where their safety could not be guaranteed or to leave them to almost certain death in the forests of Zaire. Moreover, access to refugees had been frequently limited, obstructed or denied, and makeshift refugee sites had been subjected to attacks and other atrocities by military forces. UNHCR had succeeded in evacuating a quarter of a million Rwandans, but many others had perished of starvation and disease or at the hands of military forces. Rwandan refugees were currently scattered across Central Africa, and UNHCR proposals to identify and protect those who qualified as genuine refugees had so far been implemented only in Malawi and the Central African Republic.

3. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, repeated violations of the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers had compelled her to suspend UNHCR activities. Following further violations, the Government had requested UNHCR to suspend operations in the eastern part of the country. UNHCR would limit its activities in Goma, Bukavu and Uvira to monitoring ongoing rehabilitation projects, while working towards re-establishing cooperation with the Government. In Rwanda, meanwhile, despite efforts by the Government and the international community to reintegrate almost two million people since 1994, the recent massive return of refugees from the former Zaire and the United Republic of Tanzania had contributed to further tension and violence. UNHCR was cooperating closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in monitoring the situation, but insecurity had almost halted operations in many areas in the west of the country since February 1997.

4. She was profoundly disturbed by the breakdown of fundamental humanitarian principles in the Great Lakes region, and by the international community's lack of response to it. There was an urgent need for States to reaffirm their commitment to upholding such principles and to manifest more clearly their resolve to address the political dimensions of humanitarian crises. While convinced that the response to displacement must be firmly rooted in a framework of universally accepted principles, she was also aware that certain groups operating from among large refugee populations could pose a real threat to security. However, it was the failure of States to provide political, material and military support for separating armed elements and political extremists from refugees that had compromised the civilian nature of refugee camps and put humanitarian action on an inevitable collision course with the security concerns of States in the region. In order to preserve the fundamental principles of refugee protection, it was essential that Governments support efforts to find ways to fulfil the protection needs of refugees while taking the legitimate security concerns of States into consideration.

5. The Great Lakes crisis presented some of the most serious dilemmas faced by UNHCR in implementing fundamental humanitarian principles, but also reflected a broader crisis affecting other parts of the world, including the most affluent countries. Increasing restrictions on the granting of asylum in industrialized States, interdiction at sea, and narrow interpretation of the refugee definition were cause for grave disquiet; developing countries, beset by serious economic problems, could hardly be expected to apply open and generous refugee policies if affluent countries did not set positive examples of respect for refugee rights.

6. While some refugee problems had become easier to resolve following the end of the cold war, the increasing frequency and harshness of internal conflicts was complicating the solution of others in different parts of the world. Repatriation continued to be the preferable solution

to the plight of refugees, but the reintegration of returnees in the aftermath of conflict could be extremely problematic, especially in cases where the root causes of the conflicts had not been entirely resolved.

7. UNHCR had enhanced its expertise and ability to deal with organized returns and also with returns to situations of acute insecurity and physical destruction, in which refugees faced the presence of landmines, inadequate judicial processes, issues of land ownership and availability, and the destruction of economic, social and legal infrastructures. Under such circumstances, attention needed to be given to ways to promote reintegration, reconstruction and reconciliation, which required a far more sustained and coordinated commitment to peace-building than hitherto had been the case.

8. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the nearly 183,000 refugees and 200,000 internally displaced persons who had returned to their home areas represented a relatively modest proportion of the two million displaced by the conflict; moreover, most of them had returned to majority areas, where the main challenge had been one of physical reconstruction. UNHCR had also launched a number of initiatives to promote returns to minority areas, but much stronger overall political and military support was indispensable for successfully repatriating refugees and displaced persons and rebuilding a stable multi-ethnic society.

9. A positive aspect of the reintegration activities of UNHCR worldwide was their focus on the grass-roots level and on returnees and their communities as primary actors in their own reintegration. However, there was also a need for further comprehensive strategies at all levels: if repatriation was to be sustainable, the involvement of development agencies at the onset of crises was especially important.

10. As a step in that direction, UNHCR had made efforts to systematize relations with its development and human rights partners. In addition to the traditional close cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and many non-governmental organizations, recent measures included a new framework for cooperation concluded with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), collaboration with the World Bank in developing new approaches to post-conflict reconstruction, and memoranda of understanding concluded with human rights field operations. UNHCR welcomed the Secretary-General's emphasis on the development of an integrated, system-wide strategy at the country level as an important factor in securing lasting repatriation solutions, was encouraged by initiatives to bring greater coherence to the Organization's work in humanitarian affairs in the context of United Nations reform.

11. While grateful for the continued financial support provided to UNHCR by donor Governments, she expressed concern at the decrease in financing of activities under the General Programmes, which threatened the ability of UNHCR to assist refugees in non-emergency situations and carry out other key functions. The success of certain special operations, such as the Liberian, Angolan and Tajik repatriations, also required greater financial support.

12. Despite positive news about the overall decline in the number of people of concern to her Office, there were still many bitter conflicts being fought around the world, leading to the displacement of mixed populations. Innocent refugees were being caught up with defeated military elements, political extremists and even persons guilty of crimes against humanity. Civilian populations were increasingly being targeted by rival groups contending for control of territory or people. As a result, the unarmed and unprotected staff of UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies were often caught in crossfire or even directly attacked. Such situations were unacceptable, and she called for all possible support from Governments to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian staff, particularly national staff.

13. In conclusion, she said that the progress made by UNHCR in operational response capacity needed to be matched by equally rapid and effective mechanisms at the political level on the part of Governments. The framework for building lasting solutions in fractured societies could be provided only through the political will of Governments, something that was not only their common responsibility but also their common interest. There could be no better investment in the world's future security than preventing and resolving the problems that provoked refugee flows and other forms of forced displacement.

14. **Mr. Kapanga** (Democratic Republic of the Congo) asked the High Commissioner to address the problem of armed individuals using UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies as magnets to attract or otherwise manipulate innocent refugee populations, which they then exploited as bases of support for incursions into neighbouring countries. He also asked whether UNHCR was aware that at least 500,000 refugees had crossed into his country from the Republic of the Congo over the previous four months.

15. **Mrs. Ogata** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that the location of the refugee camps so near the border of the former Zaire had been a major cause of

insecurity and problems both for humanitarian agencies and for Governments of the countries concerned. UNHCR had tried unsuccessfully on a number of occasions to negotiate a change in location and reduction in size of the camps; it was fully aware of the problems, and was entering into close consultation with the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in an effort to solve current problems and prevent their repetition. She was also aware of the inflow of refugees from the Republic of the Congo, although she did not have official figures for their number. UNHCR had provided assistance to about 37,000 people in a camp near Kinshasa, and had already started helping them to return. Additionally, her Office was aware of some 20,000 Rwandan refugees in the Republic of the Congo, as well as nearly 600,000 internally displaced persons. UNHCR was determined to continue to address fully the refugee problem in the Great Lakes region as a whole.

16. **Ms. Schosseler** (Luxembourg), speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia associated themselves with her statement. She expressed appreciation for the remarkable work carried out by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and underscored the European Union's support for extending the mandate of UNHCR for the next five years.

17. The European Union was concerned by the increase in the number of internally displaced persons, but noted with satisfaction that the total number of refugees had decreased. The Union was seriously concerned by the fact that the return of refugees and displaced persons in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina had been slowed down by the refusal of the parties concerned to fulfil their obligations. Those parties must take the necessary measures to create a favourable climate for the return of the refugees and displaced persons.

18. The recent developments in the Great Lakes region of Africa and, particularly, the allegations of massacres of Rwandan refugees and reports that they were being systematically denied access to humanitarian aid, had caused grave concern. The European Union attached great importance to enabling the Secretary-General's Investigative Team on alleged violations of international humanitarian law in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to complete its work, and supported the efforts by the Secretary-General in that regard. It was concerned by the forced repatriation of refugees to Rwanda and stressed the responsibility of the Government of Rwanda, as the country of origin, to search for solutions and cooperate with UNHCR to ensure the monitoring of the refugees' situation and their reintegration. The European Union condemned the violations of the fundamental rights of refugees and displaced persons and any manipulation of humanitarian assistance for political ends. All parties should respect international humanitarian law and the right of refugees to unconditional access to humanitarian assistance.

19. States had the primary responsibility for encouraging a climate of tolerance and preventing the development of conditions that gave rise to flows of refugees. The promotion of lasting solutions to the refugee problem was of the highest importance. The countries of origin had the main responsibility for promoting favourable conditions for the repatriation of their refugees. Governments also had the responsibility to protect refugees and ensure full respect for their fundamental rights. The European Union condemned the policy of the forced return and expulsion of refugees.

20. States which had not yet done so should ratify or accede to the relevant international conventions as soon as possible. Countries must also ensure that their legislation and administrative procedures were in accordance with the international instruments and were implemented.

21. Refugee agencies should coordinate their operational activities, and the Office should play a central role in such coordination. The promotion and protection of human rights were essential to preventing forced population displacements. The European Union supported the efforts of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in preventing such displacements, encouraged her to continue her collaboration with the Office in that regard, and strongly urged the Governments concerned to cooperate with her in the performance of her mandate. Human rights should be at the centre of any process of consolidating peace after a conflict. In that context, close cooperation between UNHCR, the United Nations human rights organs and other bodies dealing with humanitarian questions was very important. Refugees had an absolute right to return to their countries of origin, which must respect human rights and enable returnees to be integrated fully into society.

22. Reintegration and economic recovery activities must form part of a coordinated approach to ensure a smooth transition from the emergency phase to the rehabilitation and development phase.

23. The European Union was very concerned about the situation of refugee women and children and stressed the need to adapt relief programmes to their requirements. The growing insecurity of working conditions in the field was cause for grave concern. The Union condemned the attacks on humanitarian personnel and the numerous barriers impeding their access to populations in distress. All parties

involved in conflicts should concert their efforts to ensure the safety of humanitarian personnel in the field. The integrity, impartiality and neutrality of UNHCR should be fully respected, and the Office should be guaranteed free access to all places where refugees were located.

24. Lastly, the European Union, which provided a very high level of funding to the Office, stressed that adequate resources must be made available to UNHCR to enable it to perform its humanitarian task. States which had contributed little or nothing should assume a greater share of the financing of UNHCR programmes.

25. **Mr. Owada** (Japan) said that although there had been positive developments in coping with refugee problems through voluntary repatriation, UNHCR still faced many serious challenges. There was still the problem of attending to some 23 million persons, including returnees and internally displaced persons. In order to bring about a durable solution, it was essential to view the whole situation affecting them. There was a need to guarantee the safety of returnees and provide greater assistance for repatriation, resettlement and reconciliation. The repatriation of Rwandan refugees, which had been unprecedented both in its scale and complexity, had not only retarded the recovery and development of their war-torn country, but had also created new tensions and violence. In that context, the fundamental problem of how to distinguish between genuine refugees and armed elements that mingled with them was a source of serious concern.

26. Japan fully supported the Office in its efforts to ensure respect for the non-negotiable principles of non-refoulement and the right of asylum, and urged the Governments concerned to discuss with UNHCR and other related organizations specific ways of implementing those principles.

27. The safety and security of UNHCR and other humanitarian personnel was of paramount importance. All Member States should become parties to the 1994 Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel in order to bring the Convention into force without further delay. Moreover, its scope should be broadened to cover all personnel engaged in humanitarian operations. As a minimum, the United Nations should, with each new operation, determine whether there existed an exceptional risk to the safety of the personnel under article 1 of the Convention. All States should also consider ways to strengthen the protection of such personnel. Japan wished to cooperate closely with like-minded Member States in exploring further possibilities to improve that situation.

28. Since the question of refugees ranged from emergency relief to rehabilitation and reconstruction, each stage must be part of a comprehensive solution. While UNHCR could undertake the initial phase of resettlement, other relevant organizations working in the field of development should take over at an early stage of repatriation to ensure a smooth transition to longer-term programmes and peace. While Japan welcomed the Office's cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank and IMF, there was an urgent need for the international community to search for a more structural approach to dealing with post-conflict situations. Coordination between the country of origin and the country of asylum as well as with the Office and other organizations was essential. Japan, which had contributed $104 million to the Office in 1997, continued strongly to support the efforts of UNHCR. Lastly, he noted with satisfaction that the Office had entered the implementation phase of institutional reform and hoped that it would successfully complete that task under the strong leadership of the High Commissioner.

29. **Mr. Kreczko** (United States of America) said that the international community must reaffirm its commitment to the fundamental principles of asylum and non-refoulement and consider how to improve the observance of humanitarian standards. His delegation welcomed the news that the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo had agreed to accept the Secretary-General's Investigative Team on alleged violations of international humanitarian law, and hoped that that spirit of cooperation would extend to other humanitarian operations on the ground, including the re-establishment of sound working relationships between the Office and all the States of the Great Lakes region. The United States supported the efforts of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in that regard.

30. Refugees were an international responsibility. Cooperation was necessary to lessen the impact of massive influxes of refugees through burden-sharing and to provide UNHCR with the necessary financial and political support. UNHCR could carry out its mandate only if States fulfilled their responsibilities. It must not be made the scapegoat when protection failed. Countries of asylum must maintain the civilian nature of refugee camps and uphold respect for humanitarian and human rights principles. As a first priority, the Office and the international community must work together with the country of asylum to ensure that it did not forcibly repatriate refugees. The United States would support that principle, both in public and private communications with the Governments concerned. In the event that forcible return was imminent, UNHCR must assist and protect to the extent that it was able. The principle of voluntary

repatriation must be upheld, and every effort should be made not to put UNHCR in the untenable position of having to make difficult choices.

31. Activities to reconstruct economic and social services and rebuild political and judicial structures must begin as soon as repatriation occurred. The Office should set a time-frame for its reintegration activities and work with other agencies, particularly UNDP, to ensure a smooth handover at a given date. The Emergency Relief Coordinator and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee could perhaps play a role in organizing such coordinated action.

32. He welcomed the efforts of UNHCR to systematize its relations with other organizations, which was a crucial step towards enhancing coordination and cooperation.

33. One of his Government's priorities was to facilitate the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Neither the reintegration of refugees nor reconstruction were possible in that country without reconciliation, and great efforts were being made to that end. He appealed to donors to contribute to such projects as the "Open Cities" programme, aimed at supporting ethnically tolerant communities, and the Bosnian Women's Initiative, launched by his Government and others in conjunction with UNHCR to give women a greater role in decision-making in the hope of avoiding the mistakes of the past. He noted with satisfaction that a similar initiative was under way among women in Rwanda.

34. His Government had sought to ensure over the past five years that its resettlement programme was responsive to the protection needs of refugees. For some, resettlement was the only solution. UNHCR should therefore strengthen its ability to identify and refer appropriate cases to resettlement countries.

35. His Government welcomed in particular the progress made by UNHCR in enhancing the protection afforded refugee women and children.

36. It was deeply regrettable that the erosion of respect for international humanitarian law had endangered not only refugees, but also the humanitarian personnel working with them. He paid tribute to the courage of UNHCR staff and called upon all Governments to guarantee their safety and grant them unimpeded access to refugees and victims of conflict.

37. **Mr. Nuanthasing** (Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that, despite the fall in the world's refugee population during 1996, the problem of refugees remained a cause of deep concern, and a solution would require a multifaceted approach underpinned by great determination on the part of the international community and particularly the States directly concerned. He commended the efforts of UNHCR both to provide assistance for refugees in the short term and to find long-term solutions, especially through voluntary repatriation, and urged the international community to provide enhanced support for the High Commissioner and her staff. The plight of the world's refugees should not be the object of political manoeuvring; rather the issue required a humanitarian approach.

38. After the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975, a number of refugees had chosen to leave the country. Since 1980, however, some 27,000 Lao had returned to their homeland from Thailand under a programme initiated by his Government with the assistance of UNHCR and the support of donor countries. A number of problems had been encountered during the execution of the programme, including delays in the screening procedures to determine refugee status, lack of adequate funds to aid the reintegration of refugees, and indecision on the part of refugees themselves. His Government was nevertheless determined to complete the programme, thus achieving its goal of repatriating all Lao refugees from Thailand.

39. **Mr. Aass** (Norway) commended the courage of UNHCR staff and called for enhanced measures to ensure their safety.

40. The problem of refugee protection and the search for lasting solutions were too complex to be tackled by refugee and humanitarian agencies alone. Moreover, only through political action could the underlying causes of displacement be addressed. In a new and alarming trend, displacement had become not merely the result of conflict, but its very objective.

41. The situation in the Great Lakes region of Africa was a cause for particular concern. International principles of refugee protection had been blatantly disregarded, with refugees being forced to return to unsafe areas or subjected to military attack, while in recent days, UNHCR had been forced to suspend its operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. There was an urgent need for a renewed commitment by States in the region to uphold humanitarian standards and to cooperate with the international agencies working there, including UNHCR.

42. The problems in the region could be tackled only through a multifaceted approach incorporating the political, military, humanitarian and economic dimensions. As a first step, justice must be restored through the mechanism of the International Criminal Tribunal in order to pave the way for reconciliation and the eventual return of refugees.

43. At the forty-seventh session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (A/51/12/Add.1), the High Commissioner had rightly emphasized the question of refugee protection with her appeal to States to respect the principles of asylum and non-refoulement. Those principles were clearly set out in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, and he urged all countries which had not yet done so to ratify or accede to those instruments. The new Norwegian Government intended to liberalize its approach to the granting of asylum status and to increase the number of quota refugees. He hoped that other Governments would follow suit since, while voluntary repatriation remained the preferred solution, resettlement was for some refugees the only option.

44. With regard to repatriation, he welcomed the progress made in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while noting that most returns were to majority areas, whereas the parties to the Dayton Agreement had undertaken to facilitate returns to minority areas too. He hoped that such UNHCR initiatives as the "Open Cities" project might facilitate that process. The next large repatriation operation by UNHCR would take place in Liberia, and he would follow events there with interest.

45. Repatriation required not only short-term humanitarian aid, but also long-term development assistance; and post-conflict reconstruction must involve healing and reconciliation, as well as physical rebuilding. Where the effectiveness of protection regimes in countries of origin could not be guaranteed, UNHCR should cooperate closely with other United Nations agencies to monitor the safety of returnees. He welcomed in that regard the commitment by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to work more closely with UNHCR in field operations.

46. Until such time as the international community resolved the underlying problems causing population displacements, there must be a strong commitment to the basic principles of refugee protection, which, he hoped, would be reflected in the resolution adopted by the Committee under the agenda item.

47. **Mrs. Kaba Camara** (Côte d'Ivoire) said that she was encouraged by the voluntary return of more than one million refugees to their homelands over the past year, to which the High Commissioner referred in her report (A/52/12 and Add.1), and hoped that recent steps towards the resolution of regional conflicts would accelerate that process.

48. She welcomed the Secretary-General's report on assistance to refugees, returnees and displaced persons in Africa (A/52/360). Her Government had taken part in a number of initiatives aimed at addressing the problem of refugees in the region. In Sierra Leone, it had acted as a mediator in negotiations between the Government and the Revolutionary United Front, which had resulted in the signing in Abidjan of a peace accord bringing to an end six years of civil war. The return of refugees had, however, been brutally halted by a *coup d'état*. Subsequently, the decisive action of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), of which Côte d'Ivoire was a member, together with the threat of international sanctions, had forced the leaders of the *coup d'état* to restore power to the democratically elected Government. Her Government had also played a role in the settlement of the seven-year civil war in Liberia.

49. Such initiatives showed that African States were able to assume their responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security in the region. Nevertheless, they required international support, particularly through intervention strategies. Her Government was convinced of the need for a standing African intervention force, a role which might be fulfilled at the present time by the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG).

50. The African heads of State and Government had established a mechanism for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts at the 1993 Cairo Summit of the Organization of African Unity, and she was grateful to those developed countries which had expressed their readiness to lend material and logistical support.

51. On the eve of the third millennium, African countries were fully aware of the need for democratic government and respect for human rights. There were, however, other prerequisites for peace, including the equitable distribution of resources; economic and social progress; and universal access to food, health care and education. The African States were striving to achieve those goals, since failure to do so would lead to social unrest and bloody confrontation, but they urgently required the support of the international community. In order to meet the challenge of globalization, there was a need for closer economic cooperation in the region. The United Nations and other development partners must contribute to that process. Thus far, the many development plans implemented in Africa had had little real impact on poverty, which was the root cause of all the continent's ills. A Marshall plan for Africa was needed in order to tackle the problem and thereby prevent further conflicts, thus avoiding both the expense of peacekeeping and humanitarian operations and the high cost in human lives.

52. In order to facilitate the return of refugees, it was necessary to guarantee their security and to assist their reintegration in their homeland. The Governments of countries of origin must implement policies of national reconciliation, while the international organizations must ensure that refugees had adequate housing, basic social services and the means to support themselves. She was grateful to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as non-governmental organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, for their work with refugees and returnees.

53. Ultimately, the best way to address the problem of refugees was not through urgent humanitarian aid, but through the promotion of peace and economic and social development.

54. **Ms. Duran** (Venezuela) said that the problem of refugees must be considered in an overall context encompassing not only the humanitarian dimension, but also, the economic, social, cultural, political and legal aspects. While it was gratifying to note that the world's refugee population had decreased, her delegation was concerned about the increase in the number of internally displaced persons brought about by the resumption of conflicts or the outbreak of new conflicts. International protection must aim to ensure the basic rights of refugees and should be closely linked with the search for lasting solutions to their problems. While voluntary repatriation was the best solution, it was not always feasible, because of many factors which exceeded the mandate of UNHCR and were connected with political stability and the economic and social conditions in the countries of origin. In that regard, she underscored the need to take action to prevent further forced population displacements not only through the Office but also through other humanitarian, human rights and development organizations.

55. The international community needed to be aware of the causes which gave rise to conflicts; it should work to that end, and implement measures to prevent massive refugee flows. Her delegation supported the efforts of UNHCR to continue strengthening its preparedness and ability to intervene in emergency situations, as well as the coordination of its activities with other organizations in the field. Increased involvement was needed on the part of financial and development bodies in the search for sustainable solutions and for the creation of favourable climates for repatriation.

56. The right to asylum must be granted without any discrimination, whenever granting it was in accordance with the established principles of international law. Serious human rights violations were one of the main causes of population movements, whether at the beginning of a crisis or during the peace-building process after the end of a conflict. She commended UNHCR for its activities in promoting public awareness through improved understanding of the problems of refugees and attempts to secure the application of the relevant norms of international law.

57. **Ms. Legwaila** (Botswana), speaking on behalf of the countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), said that the refugee situation had deteriorated over the past 12 months, and a viable solution had continued to evade the international community. While commending the High Commissioner's report (A/52/12 and Add.1), her delegation regretted that little prominence had been given to activities in the countries of origin and of asylum. Much could be done by countries of origin to address the problem of refugees and displaced persons, which by and large was the direct result of conflicts caused by civil strife, political, ethnic and religious intolerance, poverty, and human rights violations, all of which were inexcusable.

58. The countries of SADC were continually challenged by problems associated with repatriation. Voluntary repatriation was the most enduring solution, but conditions in the countries of origin had to be sufficiently hospitable to enable refugees to volunteer to return home. The onus rested with those countries to establish resettlement programmes, with the help of the international community, in order to facilitate the reintegration of returnees.

59. Repatriation often produced more problems than it solved, for both the repatriated persons and the countries of origin. Resettlement and reintegration into society could bring as much trauma as life in exile, especially if returnees were resettled in places in which basic infrastructure had been severely damaged, and which lacked basic amenities or were strewn with landmines. Her delegation attached great importance to demining as a precondition for the safe return of refugees and their resettlement. Some countries in the southern African subregion were host to large numbers of amputees, many of them women and children, a direct result of landmines. In some of those countries, the mere act of preparing a plot to grow food or allowing children to go out and play was courting death or severe injury. Both human and financial resources were needed to undertake the painfully slow and dangerous task of demining, which must be executed through locally-run programmes in the countries affected. She urged the international community to assist in

the general rehabilitation and development of the afflicted host countries.

60. SADC welcomed the various initiatives in the development of emergency preparedness and response, and commended the work done by the Central Organ of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, whose mandate was to find practical solutions to the various conflict situations in Africa. The overwhelming majority of Africa's refugee problems arose from conflict situations, not from natural calamities. Africa was home to the world's largest number of refugees and displaced persons. The importance of preventive diplomacy, contingency planning and the development of early-warning systems could not be overemphasized. The cycle of conflict could be broken only if it was possible to anticipate the breakout of conflicts and prevent them from erupting.

61. Her delegation commended the High Commissioner and her staff for their selfless dedication to the cause of refugees and their tireless efforts to alleviate the sorry plight of those unfortunate human beings. She appealed to the international community not to retreat from protecting and assisting refugees and displaced persons in every way possible.

62. Precious resources that should have been used for development were being diverted either to the extinction of the flames of conflict or to the upkeep of an ever-increasing population of refugees and displaced persons. The international community must strive to ensure that that unhappy state of affairs was put to rest.

63. **Mr. Schatzer** (Observer for the International Organization for Migration (IOM)), recalling that the Director-General of IOM and the High Commissioner had recently signed a memorandum of understanding which provided an excellent framework for both traditional and new types of cooperation, said that that document would help to guide IOM field and headquarters staff on questions related to groups of migrants or refugees for whom the two organizations had complementary mandates or competencies.

64. The return of rejected asylum-seekers and irregular migrants was one of those sensitive areas. Both organizations had long maintained that such return was essential to ensure respect for the institution of asylum. Return was also an important element of a wider migration regime. Such a regime, to be credible, needed to balance the positive and negative elements of international migration for sending, transit and receiving countries and for the migrants themselves. All those factors strengthened the case for international cooperation in migration management.

65. Coordination of humanitarian activities and coordination between life-saving and development activities were of paramount import for an organization such as IOM, which participated actively in the various coordination bodies of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, and had also recently strengthened its cooperation in post-conflict situations at the field level with other partners of the United Nations system.

66. Over recent years, IOM had greatly increased its programme activity concerning internally displaced persons, and was currently engaged in a number of such operations, the most noteworthy being in Angola. For the past six months, it had focused on helping in the return and the integration of demobilized soldiers and their families into their home communities, a matter of crucial importance for peace in Angola. In that complex operation, where IOM had so far assisted 115,000 persons, one major problem continued to bedevil its work; having to rely on voluntary contributions in order to complete an operation that had been started with assessed peacekeeping funds. That made planning extremely difficult, and put further strain on an extremely volatile political situation. IOM was seriously concerned about the way such operations were expected to succeed on the basis of voluntary funding. He emphasized that successful demobilization was in many cases a precondition for the return of other groups, including refugees and internally displaced civilian populations.

67. As a growing number of Governments grappled with the complex issues of international movements of people, they had the right to expect from a reforming multilateral system a proactive, solution-oriented and collaborative approach. IOM was ready to take up that challenge in active partnership with the High Commissioner and other relevant intergovernmental and non-governmental participants in the international humanitarian system.

68. **Mr. Tessema** (Ethiopia) noted that, as the end of the millennium approached, the numbers of refugees and displaced people around the world were equivalent to the population of a medium-sized country. Most of them were in developing countries, which could barely shoulder the cost of such a massive influx of people. Africa was most badly affected; among the 10 major refugee source countries in the world, seven were in Africa, and five of the top 10 countries of asylum were also African.

69. It was distressing that the plight of most of the refugees showed little sign of easing, and some of the problems were in fact becoming permanent. The problem was double-edged,

as most of the burden of the huge costs of assisting refugees fell on countries of asylum. In Africa, those countries were also among the poorest in the world. Compassion fatigue was becoming more apparent in parts of Africa. As to international assistance, it appeared that owing to donor fatigue, contributions for the care of refugees were declining, an alarming development in view of the fact that the victims of refugee crises were overwhelmingly children and women.

70. The refugee problem in the horn of Africa had lingered for so long that the world seemed to be losing interest, even though there were still more than a million refugees in that region alone. He appealed to the international community to continue its assistance. He commended the cooperation arrangement put in place by UNHCR and UNDP towards finding a durable and comprehensive solution.

71. Within the past six years, Ethiopia had been receiving a constant flow of refugees from neighbouring countries; there were nearly 340,000 refugees in Ethiopia, the vast majority being Somalis. There had also been a new influx of Somali refugees into southern Ethiopia beginning in May 1997. UNHCR, in consultation with the Government of Ethiopia, had been promoting the voluntary repatriation of Somali refugees to areas in Somalia that had been determined to be safe. Those areas were primarily in north-western Somalia, where a pilot repatriation programme was under way, with the expectation of repatriating up to 40,000 Somalis by the end of 1997.

72. The current progress in efforts to restore peace in Somalia had given rise to cautious optimism with regard to repatriation, but UNHCR would require adequate funds. The Ethiopian Government appealed to the international community for additional assistance, mainly for rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. Nonetheless, for the near future there would be large numbers of Somali refugees in Ethiopia to be cared for until a durable solution was found. The current situation of those refugees was very serious, as their camps suffered from acute water shortages, often affecting the health and nutritional status of children, particularly those under five.

73. Sudanese refugees constituted the second largest group, amounting to about 38,500, in settlements in western Ethiopia. Those were refugees who had fled from southern Sudan owing to the civil war and famine. They were being assisted with supplies of basic food, and provided with some land under a local settlement project, since they had settled in areas that had the potential for agricultural production.

74. Ethiopia was in the unique situation of hosting a large number of refugees, as well as receiving considerable numbers of its own citizens who had formerly been refugees in neighbouring countries. Close to one million Ethiopian refugees had returned since 1991. Ethiopia had done much to prepare the ground and create an environment conducive to its citizens' safe return. The remaining challenge was to make the returnees fully self-reliant, for which considerable assistance was still being sought.

75. Few sufferings were more painful than being uprooted and made a refugee in another land. Similarly, there were few problems that were more difficult to deal with than being unable to cope with a massive influx of people. That was even more so for some developing countries, which bore the brunt of both aspects of the refugee problem. It was not enough to react to shocking pictures of refugees and then forget them once they were out of the headlines. The search for durable solutions needed to be given more attention than merely scrambling to provide humanitarian assistance. The core of the solution lay in preventing such crises from happening. The countries of origin and of asylum, and also the international community, had a paramount role to play in prevention, seeking solutions, and reintegration and repatriation activities.

The meeting rose at 12.20 p.m.